

Psalm 137— Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

- Please read the [General Introduction](#) as well as the Introduction to [Book I](#) and [Book V](#).
- For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the [Key to the charts](#).

Specific features of Psalm 137

- Being the follow-up to Psalm 136, Psalm 137 is a sister psalm of 135 and 136; together they constitute a group within the Second Group of Eleven Psalms in Book V (135-145). In terms of content, Psalm 137 clearly elaborates on the theme of Psalm 120, the first Song of Ascents: the situation of distress in which Israel lived “among those who hate peace” (120:6), and explains why it was difficult there to praise YHWH properly. This is symbolically expressed by the fact that Psalm 137 (with only **26** cola and 84 words) is half the size of Psalm 136 (with **52** (2 x **26**) cola and 166 words). The despondent question in 137:4 contains the quintessential thought of the poem: “How could we sing YHWH’s song in a foreign land?”.
- The subjects concerned basically determine the poetic structure of the psalm: Babylon, on the one hand, and Jerusalem and YHWH on the other. The ensuing division of the text (vs. 1-4, 5-6, 7 and 8-9) is strongly supported by the form of address: 1st person plural (vs. 1-4), 1st person singular (vs. 5-6), direct address to YHWH (v. 7) and once again 1st person plural in the direct address to Babylon (vs. 8-9).
- As a numerical composition Psalm 137 is a real showpiece. As in many psalms, e.g., in all 15 Songs of Ascents, the total number of words, **84**, is defined by the numerical value of a key-word in the text. In this case, the repeated key-word **עָרֵינוּ עָרֵינוּ**, ‘Raze it, raze it!’, occurring in v. 7c. Moreover, the number of words devoted to Babylon, **52** (Column **c**), represents the numerical value of the other key-word **אַשְׁרֵי**, ‘happy’, in vs. 8b and 9a.

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: ||

- Van der Lugt: 1-2, 3 || 4-5, 6 || 7, 8-9 (3 cantos, 6 strophes, 12 verselines and **26** cola).
- Fokkelman: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7, 8-9 (5 strophes with 12 verselines and **26** cola).
- Labuschagne: 1-2, 3-4 || 5-6, 7 || 8-9 (3 cantos and 5 strophes (as Fokkelman), with 12 verselines and **26** cola).

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words devoted to Babylon; **d**: words devoted to Jerusalem and YHWH.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in **brown**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	עַל נְהָרוֹת בָּבֶל	1 3	3		3	
	שֵׁם יְשׁבְנוּ גַם־בְּכִינוּ	4	4		4	
	בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת־צִיּוֹן:	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 1	10	= 7	+ 3	= 10	+ 0
2	עַל־עֲרָבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ	2 3	3		3	
	תִּלְיֵנוּ בְּנִרוֹתֵינוּ:	2		2	2	
	Total, v. 2	5	= 3	+ 2	= 5	+ 0
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 1-2	15	= 10	+ 5	= 15	+ 0

3	3	כי שם שאלונו	3	3	3				
		שובינו דברי־שיר		3	3	3			
	4	ותוללֵינו שמחה^		2	2	2			
		שירו לנו משיר ציון:		4	4	4			
		Total, v. 3		12	= 8	+ 4	= 12	+ 0	
		Total, v. 2-3		17	= 11	+ 6	= 17	+ 0	
		Total, v. 1-3		27	= 18	+ 9	= 27	+ 0	
4	5	איך נשיר את־שיר־יהודה^		5	5	5			
		על אדמת נָכר:		3	3	3			
		Total, v. 4		8	= 5	+ 3	= 8	+ 0	
		Strophe 2 Total, v. 3-4		20	= 13	+ 7	= 20	+ 0	
		Canto I Total, v. 1-4		35	= 23	+ 12	= 35	+ 0	
5	6	אם־אשכּחַ ירושֶׁלַם		3	3	3			
		תשכּחַ ימיני:		2	2	2			
		Off-centre pivot: 84 = 35 + 11 + 38		5	= 5	+ 0	= 0	+ 5	
		Total, v. 5		5	= 5	+ 0	= 0	+ 5	
6	7	תִּדְבֹק־לשוני לחֲכוּ		3	3	3			
		אם־לא אֶזְכְּרֶיךָ		3	3	3			
		84 = 41 + 2 + 41		5	5	5			
	8	אם־לא אעֲלֶה את־ירוּשָׁלַם^		3	3	3			
		על ראש שְׁמֹחֲתִי:		14	= 11	+ 3	= 0	+ 14	
		Total, v. 6		19	= 16	+ 3	= 0	+ 19	
		Strophe 3 Total, v. 5-6		27	= 21	+ 6	= 8	+ 19	
		Total, v. 4-6		27	= 21	+ 6	= 8	+ 19	
7	9	זכר יְהוָה לִבְנֵי אֲדוֹם		4	4	4			
		את יום ירוּשָׁלַם		3	3	3			
	10	הָאֲמָרִים עָרוּ עָרוּ = 84		3	3	3			
		עד תִּסְוֹר בָּה:		3	3	3			
		Strophe 4 Total, v. 7		13	= 10	+ 3	= 0	+ 13	
		Canto II Total, v. 5-7		32	= 26	+ 6	= 0	+ 32	
8	11	בַּת־בָּבֶל הַשְׁדּוּדָה		3	3	3			
		אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁישָׁלֶם־לָהּ^		3	3	3			
		את־נִמְוֶלֶה שְׁנִמְלֶתֶ לָנוּ:		4	4	4			
		Total, v. 8		10	= 6	+ 4	= 10	+ 0	
		Total, v. 7-8		23	= 16	+ 7	= 10	+ 13	
9	12	אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁיאֲחִז וְנִפֶן		3	3	3			
		את־עַלְלִיךְ אֶל־הַסֵּלַע:		4	4	4			
		Total, v. 9		7	= 7	+ 0	= 7	+ 0	
		Canto III Strophe 5 Total, v. 8-9		17	= 13	+ 4	= 17	+ 0	
		Total, v. 7-9		30	= 23	+ 7	= 17	+ 13	
		Total, v. 6-9		44	= 34	+ 10	= 17	+ 27	
		Total, v. 5-9		49	= 39	+ 10	= 17	+ 32	
		Total, v. 1-9		84	= 62	+ 22	= 52	+ 32	

Observations

1. The 2 middle words are לְשׁוֹנִי לְחֶכֶּי, 'my tongue to my palate' ($84 = 41 + 2 + 41$), in v. 6a, but the consciously designed meaningful centre is constituted by the 4 middle cola in vs. 5-6a ($26 = 11 + 4 + 11$):

אִם-אֶשְׁכַּח יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי:

תִּדְבֹק-לְשׁוֹנִי לְחֶכֶּי אִם-לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶי

If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither away!

May my tongue cling to my palate, if I do not remember you!

In terms of words, the poetic pivot is slightly off-centre: $84 = 35 + 11 + 38$, in much the same way as in Psalms 118 and 135 – see Observation 1 in my Analysis of [Psalm 135](#). The meaningfulness of this beautiful chiasmically arranged protestation lies in the fact that the remembrance of Jerusalem was crucial to Israel's survival in the exile.

2. There is difference of opinion about the strophic structure of the psalm – see above under "Strophic structure". Van der Lugt's division of the text is based on the regularity of the poetic framework: 3 cantos, 6 strophes, 12 verselines and 26 cola. He presumes a caesura between vs. 5 and 6, dividing the text into two equal halves (3+3 strophes, 6+6 verselines and 13+13 cola). Additionally, his canto division is partly underscored by a certain regularity on word level, Cantos I and II being of equal length:

Canto I,	vs. 1-3	2 strophes	4 verselines	27 words
Canto II,	vs. 4-6	2 strophes	4 verselines	27 words
Canto III,	vs. 7-9	2 strophes	4 verselines	30 words.

In my opinion, however, in terms of thought content, there is no caesura either between vs. 3 and 4, or between vs. 5 and 6. This division of the text on purely formal grounds is overruled by what I consider to be the basic strophic structure of the psalm. This framework is determined by two factors corroborating each other: first, *the subjects* concerned: **Babylon**, on the one hand, and **YHWH and Jerusalem**, on the other, and second, *the form of address*: the 'we'-form and the 2nd person form of address. In other words, the division of the text based on the subjects concerned coincides precisely with the two forms of address:

Strophe 1 vs. 1-2	Babylon: the general situation there	'we' form
Strophe 2 vs. 3-4	Babylon: the harassment by the captors	'we' form
Strophe 3 vs. 5-6	Jerusalem, I shall always remember you	1 st pers. sing.
Strophe 4 vs. 7	YHWH, please remember what Edom did	2 nd pers. sing.
Strophe 5 vs. 8-9	Babylon: retribution for the devastator	'we' form.

The canto- and strophic structure presented here, is logotechnically underscored by the fact that **52** (2×26) words are devoted to Babylon (35 in Canto I and 17 in Canto III), while **32** are devoted to Jerusalem (19) and YHWH (**13**).

3. There are two considerations behind the compositional formula $84 = 52c + 32d$: first, the fact that **52** represents the numerical value of the important key-word in vs. 8-9, אֲשֶׁר, 'happy' ($1 + 21 + 20 + 10 = 52$). The 'happiness' concerns the just punishment for the Babylon empire in retribution for what she has done to Jerusalem. Second, the *kabod* number **32** in vs. 5-7 signifies YHWH's presence and his involvement in the expected requital of the devastator. This is buttressed by the **13** words addressed to YHWH and the **17** addressed to Babylon, which constitute the 'minor' *YHWH echad* formula: $30 = 17 + 13$. The 'minor' formula is reinforced by the 'major' one, **39** = **26** + **13**, occurring in vs. 5-9 (**26** words before *atnach* in vs. 5-7 and **13** before *atnach* in vs. 8-9).

4. Psalm 137 is one of the many psalms – e.g., all 15 Songs of Ascents - of which the number of words is determined by the numerical value of a key-word in the text. Here, it concerns the repeated key-word עָרֵי עָרֵי, “Raze it, raze it!” (16 + 20 + 6) x 2 = **84** (v. 7c). The cry is supposed to have been uttered by the Edomites at the fall of Jerusalem. Interestingly, unlike the requital of Babylon, which is anticipated with glee, the repayment of Edom is not elaborated on.
5. Here is a survey of the divine name numbers woven into the fabric of the text:

vs. 1-9	26 cola in total
vs. 2-3	17 words in total
vs. 5-7	26 words before atnach
vs. 8-9	17 words in total
vs. 6-9	34 (2 x 17) words before atnach
Column c	52 (2 x 26) words in total.
6. The name יהוה appears twice: in vs. 4a and 7a.

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